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TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF HR SR

SUBJECT: CROATIAN VIEWS ON THE WAY AHEAD WITH SERBIA

REF: ZAGREB 180

Classified By: PolOfficer Peter D'Amico, for reasons 1.4(b) & (d).

¶1. (C) In a recent conversation with PolOffs, Ambassador Davor Vidis, MFA Director General for the Southeastern European Region, said that the GoC still hopes to build on the momentum from PM Sanader's March visit to Belgrade (ref A) to deepen Croatia's bilateral relationship with Serbia. It seemed, however, that the two sides have differing priorities regarding the key issues to discuss. The GoC understood that more difficult issues such as refugees and Croatia's genocide case against Serbia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) could not be taken off the table for political reasons, but Croatia did not want them to dominate a high-level meeting.

¶2. (C) On the refugee issue in particular, Vidis believed that more progress could be made by handling specific issues on the expert level than with high-level political attention.

Vidis expressed disappointment that when he met with Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, s chief of staff the week of May 18, the focus of the discussion was almost entirely on the refugee issue. (NOTE: In a separate meeting, when PolCouns inquired of the new Serbian DCM to Croatia about the focus of the bilateral relationship, the only issue the Serbian DCM mentioned was the refugee issue, specifically trying to get some form of compensation for Serbs who fled Croatia and have no intention of returning. END NOTE.)

Croatia Looking for a "Less Political" Agenda

¶3. (C) According to Vidis, Zagreb wanted to focus on issues that were less sensitive such as energy cooperation, the fight against organized crime in the region, and mutual support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Examples of this type of engagement include Croatian State Secretary Davor Bozninovic's participation in an international conference in Belgrade on May 29 regarding Serbia's European future, or the meeting between State Secretary Bianca Matkovic and Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Mladjan Dinkic on the margins of a regional ministerial meeting in Turkey on June 1 to discuss economic cooperation. Vidis said the bilateral agenda could also include lower level technical issues, such as flight approaches to the Osijek airport (near the Serbian border), or opening of consulates. The GoC viewed these types of issues as ones where both sides could easily make progress in advancing relations, although Vidis wryly noted that efforts in Belgrade to count the Croatian Embassy in Pristina as a consulate in Serbia were not particularly helpful.

¶4. (C) Another potential avenue of cooperation would be for Croatia to share its translations of voluminous EU regulations and legislation with Serbia as well as other EU aspirants sharing the same (almost) language. On June 10, Petar Mihatov, Chief of Staff for State Secretary Bozinovic, told PolOff, however, that the GoC had not yet agreed on whether or how to give translated copies of the acquis documents to Serbia. The GoC was considering plans for passing on the documents as part of a larger agreement to help Serbia and other countries in Southeast Europe with the EU accession process, but a final decision had not yet been

reached.

15. (C) Vidis has also confirmed that Zagreb was still hopeful a visit by President Tadic to Croatia could be arranged this summer. (NOTE: A Serbian Embassy staffer told post in a separate conversation that their Embassy was also looking for a concrete deliverable for a potential visit from President Tadic to Zagreb, but they had not found one yet. If Tadic did not visit Zagreb in July, he would likely postpone any visit until early 2010, to avoid having the trip take place in the run-up to Croatia's presidential election. END NOTE.) Serbian Community in Croatia

16. (C) When discussing the Serbian minority community in Croatia, Vidis noted that the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS), which is part of the ruling coalition, played a constructive role in advocating for Serbian community without being used as a vehicle by other countries. Vidis had a less positive view of the Serbian Democratic Forum,s (SDF) independence and contacts with both Belgrade and Moscow. Vidis, who had recently traveled to Moscow, said that he had told the GoR that the Croatian Serbs should not be used as a tool to create problems in Croatia, a message that had also been sent to Belgrade.

Comment

17. (C) Zagreb clearly would like to improve its relations with Serbia as a practical matter. But tensions over issues such as Kosovo, war crimes and refugees will continue to put strains on such contacts. In its efforts to build on the positive trend in relations with Belgrade, Zagreb will struggle to find the balance between addressing the sensitive issues of the past stemming from the war and strengthening areas of mutual cooperation that focus more on the future of the region.

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